

Summary Write Up of the DGAG Talk Tuesday 19 November 2024

Revisiting the Stone Circles of Dorset: An Archaeologist's Perspective of Sarsen Stones

Speaker: Dr. Anne Teather.

The talk was a wonderful, all too short, foray into the Neolithic era (approximately 6,000-4,000 years ago) or 3,200-2,400 BCE and was enjoyed by 30 attendees. The many questions after the talk showed the high level of interest from the audience. There was even a hint of fascinating volunteer projects in Dorset area for those interested to follow up (see Volunteer Wanted note at the end). Although we cannot reproduce entirely the talk, we have some of the slides as a PDF document on the DGAG website to assist in education.

Firstly, the speaker gave us a valuable introduction, with some examples, into the broader archaeological topic of Stone Circles, Timber circles and Henges.

Sometimes these features are:

- Composite (Arbor Low – Derbyshire)
- The Ring of Brodgar – “Heart of Neolithic Orkney” with stones from 8 different lithologies from several quarries around the settlement area.
- Sometimes there are wood circles with the stone circles (Stanton Drew – Somerset)

In the last 10-20 years archaeological interpretation of these features suggests that these constructs were created over relatively long periods (compared to modern “single event” construction projects) The archaeological rings were more of an accumulation in say a “ring site” formed by a series of “community or special events”. There is evidence of perhaps similar thinking in ancient customs but practiced in recent history in Madagascar where monuments with wood poles were for living people of importance and stone monuments were for the ancestors. So all these archaeological circles are being looked at with new interpretations as to what they were used for and how they were constructed.

In the second part, the speaker went through some of the main Stone Circles of Dorset, some of which noted below:

- Tenants Hill
- Kingston Russell Stone Circle - Sarsens
- Site IV at Mt Pleasant – Near Hardy’s house

Summarized indeed perhaps by a comment that West Dorset Neolithic communities “did it there own way” sort of like a Neolithic “Disney Twist Theme park”! This justified due to the density of constructs along the “South Dorset superhighway” (i.e. more than seen in Somerset and North Dorset) and the complexity and long lived use of the rings. Further study is required, hence the request for volunteers.

Volunteers wanted: Flexible times for archaeological stone surveys. Sounds good if you would like to be in the great outdoors in Dorset! Basically a new 4 year project “Living amongst the Sarsens: Revealing the Hidden Heritage of the Valley of Stones”. This requires as many volunteers as possible to help, free training provided. Best to contact Past Participate website link as noted below for further details, they suggest joining up to a mailing list. Apparently, there will be more opportunities coming for different types of volunteering work in the spring/summer 2025 onwards.

The talk complimented an earlier talk last year by Mervyn Jones (see in the DGAG website the write-up and slides on that talk - Geoarchaeology of puddingstone in Hertfordshire and Dorset). The next DGAG talks and events are as shown on the DGAG website and Facebook page. More speakers are required for 2025, so please ask your networks and let me know who may be interested.

Chris Webb
DGAG Events – Editor

Additional Links:

1. Archaeology website

<https://www.pastparticipate.co.uk/>

2. Archaeology blog site

<https://www.pastparticipate.co.uk/blog>